

U.S. Said to Increase Arms Aid for Afghan Rebels

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WASHINGTON, May 3—The United States has stepped up the quantity and quality of covert military support for Afghan insurgents fighting Soviet forces and the Soviet-backed Government in Kabul, according to Administration officials.

The officials said President Reagan made the decision last fall with the purpose of forcing Moscow to pay a higher price for its more than three-year-old

effort to assert control over Afghanistan.

The officials denied that there was any connection between this and what they said were recent increases in Soviet and Cuban aid for Nicaragua and for Salvadoran guerrillas. They also denied that their confirmation now of activities that the Administration had been assiduously keeping secret was intended as a signal to the Soviet Union. The Americans confirmed the activities only after being told that Soviet officials had reported them in Moscow earlier this spring.

Beginning last December, the officials said, the Central Intelligence Agency was ordered to provide the Afghan insurgents for the first time with bazookas, mortars, grenade launchers, mines and recoilless rifles. One official said shoulder-fired antiaircraft missiles were also being supplied. Almost all the arms were said to be of Soviet manufacture.

Together with stepped-up Soviet military activity, the officials said, the result has essentially been to maintain the

standoff between the Soviet forces and their Afghan surrogates and the insurgents, at a higher cost to both sides.

The judgment of Administration intelligence analysts and experts is that the overall Soviet military position has improved somewhat, but that the Soviet-backed Government of Babrak Karmal remains hopelessly unpopular and that his army is of dwindling utility.

The officials said Administration policy was to pursue a negotiated settlement of the war, but acknowledged that there seemed to be little chance of reconciling differences.

Moscow has been putting pressure on Pakistan to stem the flow of supplies across its border into Afghanistan. But the officials said the Pakistanis continued to refuse separate arrangements with Moscow as part of a general understanding with Washington for a six-year, \$3.2 billion aid package.

The arms are brought to Pakistan by ship and aircraft and then trucked to the border areas.

Soviet officials recently asserted that China had reduced its support for the Afghan guerrillas, but Administration officials said their information was otherwise.

Saudi Arabia and Egypt are also said to be involved in covert support for the guerrillas. Iran is also reported to be providing a limited amount of arms to Shiite Moslems in Afghanistan.

U.S. and Saudis Paying Bill

The officials said that a large portion of the arms came from old Egyptian stockpiles of Soviet weapons and that the Saudis and the United States were paying the bills. The total cost of the operation is estimated to have been between \$30 million and \$50 million a year for the last three years, with the United States paying about half.

Told that Soviet officials said in March that the United States had stepped up the arms flow to the insurgents, a senior Administration official responded, "Good, I'm glad they're feeling it."

According to this official and others, Mr. Reagan's decision came after months of haggling within the Administration over what to do.

One political appointee in the Administration said: "I couldn't believe that after all we had said about helping the guerrillas and being tough on the Russians, we weren't really doing much to help. It was outrageous."

Pakistan Leaders Concerned

An Administration expert said the restraints were largely in deference to Pakistani leaders, who had expressed concern about being too exposed. Pakistani leaders were said to be particularly concerned about doing things that could provoke a Soviet strike against guerrilla staging areas in Pakistan.

Administration officials spoke of an internal debate between what they called the "bleeders," or those who wanted to draw more and more Soviet troops into Afghanistan, and those who sought a more cautious approach. They said common ground was found last fall in the President's decision to increase the quantity, but more especially the quality, of arms to the insurgents.

Nonetheless, the officials said Mr. Reagan was still committed to a negotiated settlement and was supporting efforts by the United Nations Under Secretary General, Diego Cordovez, in Geneva. The Geneva talks are primarily between the Soviet Union and Pakistan. Political representatives of the Afghan insurgents and of Iran are also kept informed.

Little Progress Reported

The Administration officials described the talks as serious but as having made little headway. The official Soviet position, stated most recently by Yuri V. Andropov, the Soviet leader, in an April interview with the West German magazine Der Spiegel, is, "As soon as outside interference in the affairs of Afghanistan has been terminated and the nonresumption of such interference guaranteed, we shall withdraw our troops."

Moscow is also seeking an Afghan Government that will remain under its control and have a pro-Soviet foreign policy.

There are deep doubts among Administration experts about gaining the necessary unity among the Afghan insurgents for a settlement, let alone the basis for an agreed coalition government. Expert judgment is that Moscow would probably sacrifice President Karmal, but that even this would not be enough to reconcile with the insurgents.

'Beyond Anyone to Figure Out'

Mr. Cordovez is said to be paying particular attention to post-hostilities arrangements for Afghan refugees. Over three million refugees, or about one-fifth of the Afghan population, are estimated to be in Pakistan. "It is beyond anyone to figure out how all of these refugees could return home without bringing about the overthrow of the Soviet clients," one expert said.

Soviet forces entered Afghanistan in December 1979, and Pentagon officials put their present total at about 105,000. Soviet officials recently said Moscow had no intention of adding to its forces, and Administration experts said this conformed with intelligence reports.

A Pentagon report published in March said, "After more than three years, the Soviets find themselves embroiled in a counterinsurgency campaign that cannot be won with current force levels."

Soviet casualties are estimated to be about 11,000, with a third killed in action. Total Afghan guerrilla forces could be as high as 200,000.

Administration officials said that during last spring, summer and fall the Soviet forces carried out extensive offensive, but had little to show for it. They pulled back and Afghan Government forces took their place. But, the officials said, crops that the guerrillas had destroyed.